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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003703

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2026
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LAHOUD REJECTS PATRIARCH'S CALL TO QUIT

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) In a one-on-one 11/27 meeting with the Ambassador, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir -- asking that this information be closely held -- revealed that he had recently sent a written letter to President Emile Lahoud suggesting that Lahoud resign for the sake of Lebanon. Faced with Lahoud's rejection of his request, Sfeir concluded that Lahoud was trapped by Syria. Sfeir also concluded that both Parliament Speaker Berri and Michel Aoun are "imprisoned" by Syria, Iran, and Hizballah. Deeply concerned about reports of a U.S. softening on Syria, Sfeir was reassured by the Ambassador's message that U.S. support for Lebanon remains strong and non-negotiable. Sfeir expressed satisfaction with a drop in Aoun's popularity, claiming that even some of Aoun's deputies no longer support him, but he lamented at his inability to dissuade Aoun from sending followers to the street to join Hizballah demonstrators. While insisting that a solution to Lebanon's problems should begin with a change in the presidency, Sfeir was pessimistic that such a change was imminent. Sfeir repeated his recent statements about the ideal presidential candidate being someone who can bridge the March 8-March 14 divide. In closing the meeting with a reference to former Lebanese Ambassador to the U.S. Simon Karam, Sfeir hinted that he may be looking beyond the usual list of presidential candidates for an acceptable choice. End summary.

A MESSAGE TO LAHOUD: QUIT

12. (S) Accepting the Ambassador's message of condolence over the murder of Minister Pierre Gemayel, Patriarch Sfeir noted that he is deeply worried about political developments. Asking the Ambassador to protect this information, he revealed the reason behind the unusual meeting between Beirut Bishop Abu Jaoude and President Emile Lahoud a few days earlier: angered by Pierre Gemayel's murder and presumed Syrian complicity, Sfeir sent what he claimed was a sharply worded written letter to Lahoud, delivered by Abu Jaoude. In it, Sfeir suggested that Lahoud resign for the sake of Lebanon, the Maronite community, and the Lahoud family. Lahoud read the letter and asked Abu Jaoude to tell the Patriarch that he will not leave office until the last minute of his extended mandate. Based on Abu Jaoude's briefing of Lahoud's reaction, Sfeir concluded that the President is trapped by the Syrians, unable to take a decision and fearful for his life. Lahoud "is impossible." Sfeir looked horrified when the Ambassador suggested allowing the written letter to leak, in hopes of embarrassing Lahoud into

quitting. In Sfeir's view, such an intentional leak would taint the Patriarchate of playing "dirty politics," whatever the benefits to Lebanon.

LIKE LAHOUD, AOUN REJECTS
PATRIARCH'S REQUEST

13. (S) Sfeir glumly noted that Parliament Speaker Berri and even MP Michel Aoun, like Lahoud, also seem to be trapped in a Syrian-Iranian-Hizballah prison. Sfeir noted that at least Berri's "servility" to Iran is understandable, given the reality of Shia relations. But Michel Aoun walked willingly into "the Syrian prison." Sfeir lamented that Aoun seems to be "as deaf as Lahoud," in that Aoun has rejected the Patriarch's request not to join Hizballah-organized street demonstrations. At least, the Patriarch said (with obvious satisfaction), Aoun's support is dropping. Referring to Aoun bloc MPs who have been visiting the Patriarch, Sfeir claimed that even Aoun deputies in some cases no longer support him, "although they don't dare to say so."

CONCERN ABOUT USG SOFTENING
VIS-A-VIS SYRIA

14. (SBU) The Patriarch cited with concern articles in the pro-Syrian Lebanese press citing the Iraq Study group to argue that the USG position toward Syria is softening. The Ambassador reaffirmed to the Patriarch the strong, bipartisan, White House-Congressional support for Lebanon. This support is not negotiable, the Ambassador said; USG policy supporting Lebanese independence and sovereignty has not and will not change. "Good, good," the Patriarch

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responded.

LOOKING FOR A BRIDGING CANDIDATE

15. (S) Asked by the Ambassador about the best way out of Lebanon's current political impasse, Sfeir responded that a permanent solution should start with a change in the presidency. "But how?" he asked, saying that he saw "no way forward." He repeated his recent statements that the ideal president should be someone who can bridge the gaps between the March 8 and March 14 blocs, someone who has credibility with both camps. The person should be "honest," with sufficient moral authority to restore the presidency after the "vacuum" created by Emile Lahoud. The Ambassador noted that, previously, Sfeir had spoken favorably of March 14 candidates. Saying that it was "too late," Sfeir said that the person must be able to talk to "all the Lebanese from equal distance." Sfeir would not be drawn out to comment on names, except to reject LAF Commander Michel Sleiman ("we don't need another military man") and question the stamina of the octogenarian gourmand Michel Edde. But, intriguingly, as the meeting closed and the Patriarch accompanied the Ambassador to the door, Sfeir asked whether the Ambassador knew Simon Karam (former Lebanese Ambassador to Washington and a founding member of the Qornet Shehwan Christian opposition group superceded by the March 14 movement). When the Ambassador responded affirmatively, the Patriarch said that Karam "is a good man."

COMMENT

16. (S) During Christmas mass eleven months ago, the Patriarch -- with Emile Lahoud in the congregation -- elliptically called for Lahoud to resign, by asking the President to do what was best for Lebanon. Sfeir, while not sharing the text, insisted that he was clearer this time. This is a dramatic step. Given the confidentiality Sfeir shared by acknowledging this letter, we must not be the

source of a leak of this letter's existence. But Lebanon is a small enough place that rumors about this letter will surely surface from other sources. When this letter does eventually become public (preferably in its full text), it will contribute to the momentum for Lahoud's removal. And if Sfeir was floating a trial balloon with his references to Simon Karam, we see a problem: Nabih Berri opposes him based on local politics in the south, the home base for both.

FELTMAN